

DAGOBERT'S CHILDREN

X. "ON THE RHINE IS MY HEART"

BY L. J. BEESTON

TWO leagues eastward—quite that—they heard a continuous rumble of noise, a dull monotony. For long days this sound, soothing at a distance, had quivered through the wintry air. One might have mistaken it for the rumble of trains crawling over roads buried under the snow, through copses, over rustic bridges spanning petrified streams, creeping along behind enormous brown horses with glossy coats steaming, creeping along under the pale sky of winter days, the wan, pitiless sunsets of winter skies.

In reality this rumble was the far eddying sound of

"Not this time, my heroes," grunted Dagobert. He began a retreat. They all followed. At first the trees screened them, and then the rise of the hummock as they glided away on the farther side.

On flat ground they went off at the double, making for a briar hedge. Through this hedge they scrambled, and after five minutes' trot came unexpectedly upon a church in a dale. It had a square tower of granite, and granite walls, and was old. On three sides was a churchyard. It was a pretty object, this ancient church. Its white headstones of graves looked a dull color against the snow. Its stained windows were full of the afternoon light.

HALFWAY up one side of the dale, and about twelve yards from the church, a man in a long overcoat was sitting on the stump of a tree. Before him was a small, portable easel. The smoke from his pipe curled into the air. "Bonjour, Monsieur Artist," said the Count.

"Bonjour, Monsieur," answered the other, with the merest glance at the francs-tireurs.

"A pretty scene, n'est-ce pas?"

"Assuredly."

"Monsieur is an Englishman?"

"He is."

"A war artist, I need not ask?"

"You need not."

"I trust Monsieur has his credentials? Pray do not think me inquisitive; but I have excellent reasons for believing that some German soldiers are coming this way."

"Thanks," drawled the Englishman, sketching, his head on one side.

"We are going into this church," said Dagobert.

"I trust you will find it interesting."

"Profoundly. I have a good eye for ecclesiastic architecture. May I crave a favor?"

"By all means."

"If these German gentlemen in our rear come along this way, I trust you will not consider it necessary to inform them that I am inside, with my small family here?"

"Bah! I am no talebearer."

"Many thanks, Monsieur. And then I may add that if there is any fighting you will have an excellent opportunity to introduce it into your sketch."

"Nothing would please me better."

"Au revoir, then, Monsieur l'Anglais."

"Au revoir, Monsieur Franc-Tireur."

Dagobert marched his men through the graveyard. The ponderous, carved door was ajar.

THIS was no big church, though old as the second Henri. Just beyond the portal was a small space with a stone bench on each side. Then appeared the nave, with four stone pillars on each side of its length, and at the opposite end the high altar. A brass rail inclosed the space before the high altar, and a girl was kneeling on a step before this rail. She must certainly have heard the tramping of the Frenchmen's feet; but she did not turn her head, and she continued to murmur her prayers. She must have been greatly in earnest not to turn round, this young peasant girl who wore her golden hair in two long plaits over her shoulders.

The stained panes darkened the pale winter light. The remnants of ancient frescoes on the walls were hardly to be seen.

"It is not so cold in here," said Jolibois, whose teeth were chattering.

"Close the door and drag three pews before it," ordered the Count. He went up to the girl. "Mademoiselle, we are French soldiers," said he curtly. "There is likely to be some fighting here. Pray leave us."

But the girl did not answer him. Dagobert leaned over her and saw that she was sobbing. He repeated his request, and as she continued to pay no attention to it he desisted.

In a few moments the closed door, of heavy oak, lined as stone, covered with rivets, was barricaded against possible attack.

The house of God had become a fortress. It was a desecration that did not trouble the Count. He had seen the great cathedral at Orléans when ten thousand Frenchmen, prisoners, after the second battle, encamped on the stone floor and made fires with the benches for fuel. That never to be forgotten spectacle! With men sleeping on the high altar steps, and surgeons, red with blood, working at the operating tables in the side chapels! And the painted windows that preached holy things danced with flames, and hell spread out its work, its frightful evidence, in that place of prayer become a charnelhouse!

"This is so much trouble wasted," said Bordenave, the schoolmaster, toiling at the task of barricading.

"Who knows?" answered Laporte, shrugging. "Those Blues were prowling about as if they did not know where they were; yet all the while they came nearer. At any rate, the Captain has his doubts."

Dagobert passed through an interior doorway that opened into the tower. Here hung the ropes that swung the bell. A ladder, almost perpendicular, went up to a wooden staging. When one stood upon this staging he was just alongside the bell, which was suspended from beams. Its dome had the appearance of stone or lead. D'Ormonde, following his leader, struck with bent knuckle upon the metal, which growled at him, a deep, profound snarl of sound that seemed to creep all over the surface and perished through imperceptible degrees.

From this staging a second ladder went up, and, passing through a hole just large enough to admit a man's body, led to the stone floor of the tower. A low parapet, battlemented, extended round the top of the tower, waist high. The francs-tireurs, flat on the rough stone floor, peered through the embrasures. They saw the briar hedge through which they had broken zigzagging away northward, and beyond that, to the left, the copse of birch trees, and between the copse and the hedge came the Prussians, the troop of Black Brunswickers, with a death's head and crossbones on their shakos.

And between the Germans and the church was the war artist, smoking his pipe, sketching with pains this picturesque old tower.

The pale sun, which had but little life in it, was drawing into the southwest mournfully, veiled with mists; and in its path followed the evening star, the planet Hesperus, a silver point of light. The rumble which resembled the peaceful rolling of wains came incessantly from the eastern horizon. Presently, when the sky was darkened, would be seen the stream of sparks from the fuses of shells tossed high from the guns.

Nothing could be more placid than the spirit of this wintry eve, which rose from the patient fields, and the still trees, and descended from the sky, and glorified the worn face of the tower.

DAGOBERT held up a hand and uttered a low growl which meant "Hush!"

The Prussians had halted. Two of them, standing away from the rest, talked loudly together. One cried, "I told you so. These francs-tireurs have the power of dissolving into air. But you are quite sure that you saw them?"

"Blitzen! I think that, after all, I must have imagined it," answered the other, also very loud, peering all round the horizon.

A grim smile stirred Dagobert's mustaches. He perceived that either the Germans were playing with him, or, what was more likely, they wanted to edge nearer to the church under cover of ignorance. He grunted to his wolves, "Be ready—and wait!"

The Germans looked at the artist wonderingly. They could not ignore his presence. They went up to him boldly, and in that loud voice which was meant to deceive the enemy the first speaker demanded:

"I must trouble you for your papers, Mr. Correspondent." This Prussian, who wore a quartermaster's stripes, spoke in perfect English.

The Englishman put his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other, dived into his long topcoat, and produced his necessary credentials. He had a fair, freckled face, and blue eyes cold as the dawn.

"On the staff of 'The Illustrated'?" cried the quartermaster. "We have a complete set of volumes of your paper at home,—bound in leather, tall and heavy, and nobody ever looks at them."

The artist bowed ironically and resumed his sketching.

"You have seen any francs-tireurs pass by here, Mr. Correspondent?"

"One is always seeing those bandits. Between you and me, Mr. Officer, you do well to shoot them without trial. They rob where they should protect, and are a disgrace."

"But you have seen some pass by here recently?"

Two thoughts flashed through the artist's head. One, "That franc-tireur fellow who spoke to me was a gentleman"; two, "They are in the church, so they certainly did not pass by." He answered, "No, Mr. Officer."

Out of the corner of his eye the Prussian regarded footprints up to the door of the church. The correspondent's answer in no way deceived him. He was rather pleased with it. His idea was to bring his men a little closer before making a rush for the door. So he



"Come On, You Rascal!" Snarled the German.

the guns of besieged Paris, the belching thunder of Mont Valérien, and the incessant crashes from the Prussian mortars.

"Eighteen—nineteen—twenty—*coûte tout!*" And, having spoken, Count Raoul Dagobert screwed up his eyes as if the effort of seeing and counting at so great a distance had made them smart.

Dagobert and the seven children remaining to his care crouched in a copse of birch trees along the side of a hummock. The silver-barked trees which all summer had hung down their tiny, tremulous leaves in showers of beauty, had lost their foliage to stripping tempests, to the fierce late of frosts.

Between this copse and the goal of the Count's piercing gaze was the slope of fields broken by a straggling hedge here, a clump of ugly pollards there. And right away at the end of the slope was a moving line of men who had three horses to the lot of 'em. They crawled this and that way like an uncertain caterpillar, where the under clouds of late afternoon, the dun horizon heavy with snow, seemed resting on the earth.

"All at sea, my Captain," said Laporte. "Uh! Uh!"

"Black Brunswickers."

"Diab! You can tell that at such a distance?"

"They are wearing the shakos of Black Brunswickers. I should say a detachment of scouts that have lost their way. They have been in a fight, too. A ragged and depressed lot. They are coming this way."

The caterpillar was approaching in uncertain fashion.

"We can pick off six at least before they reach us," commented Jolibois.